

Framing Your Own “Quaker Kernel”

(Some thoughts from the NYYM Quaker Outreach Working Group)

Has this ever happened to you?

You're at a social occasion and an acquaintance turns to you and says, “*Hey, I didn't know you're a Quaker.*”

Or maybe you're having a discussion of current events with some colleagues when the topic of Quakers comes up. Someone says, “*Aren't Quakers extinct?*”

Or you're having a casual conversation with new neighbors and the topic turns to religious affiliations. You mention that you are a Quaker. “*Really?*” your neighbor says. “*I didn't know there was a Quaker church around here.*”

Each of these situations is an invitation for a pithy response—a brief statement that authentically conveys your commitment to the Quaker path and gently invites others to inquire more. But if we're not ready for these moments, it's likely we'll become self-conscious or tongue-tied—or maybe too wordy and confusing – thus missing an opportunity to share our measure of the Light.

Just as job-seekers are advised to have their “elevator pitch” well-practiced and ready to go when an opportunity arises, so too Quakers are advised to be ready at any time to share briefly and personally what they find of value in the Quaker community. In shaping your own message, your own Quaker Kernel, here are some things to keep in mind.

1. Let go of the notion that you have to say everything so you can find the words that convey your own experience.

Start by writing down everything you might like to say. Then get out a red pen and edit out everything that's not essential to conveying what *you* find compelling about Quakers. There are many true things that can be said about Quakers, but you *don't need to say them all!* Keep in mind that your goal is, not only to be responsive, but to open the door to further conversation. That can best be accomplished by speaking personally...and briefly.

Example: I have found that Quakers support each other in their own spiritual journeys
rather than

Quakers were founded in the mid-17th century by George Fox, a dissenter who stressed continuing revelation and the need for each person to find their own spiritual path.

2. Accentuate the positive.

It's often a temptation to define Quakerism by what it isn't rather than by what it is. This can lead to sounding critical of other religions, and it also begs the question of what Quakers are and believe.

Example: Quakers believe everyone can have a direct relationship with the divine,
rather than

Quakers don't have ordained clergy or an established creed.

3. Practice your message out loud to weed out the “stop” words.

Speak your message out loud to one or two people who will give you honest feedback. Ask them to tell you when they get confused or start to glaze over. What are the words that cause them to stop and lose attention? Be alert for Quaker-ese like “monthly meeting,” “testimonies,” and “unprogrammed.” What you don't want to do is confuse the listener or make them feel stupid—and you don't want to rely

on jargon rather than finding the words that convey your *own* experience.

4. Resolve to ask questions. Then tailor your words to the listener's needs and interests.

Be ready to alter the tone or examples in your message depending on the situation and your assessment of the person's interests and needs. Your message is most effective if it's personal and if it's geared to the interests of the listener. Is the person you're talking to just curious or is he trying to learn more about you and your beliefs. Is he seeking a comparison with his own religious affiliation? Or perhaps is she in a process of spiritual questioning—or looking for a spiritual home in which to bring up a family? If it isn't clear, don't be afraid to ask a question. A dialogue is more engaging than a monologue.

Example: I'd be glad to answer that question, but why do you ask?

Or

Thank you for that question. Do you have any impressions or knowledge of Quakerism already?

5. Include an invitation to talk further.

Casual conversations can sometimes lead to more discussion later. Most Quakers are not comfortable with the idea of proselytizing, but we should all feel comfortable with being responsive to people's spiritual questions and exploration.

Example: If you're interested, I'd love to have you come with me some time to experience Quaker worship.

6. Keep practicing.

Our ability for clear, plain and concise expression increases as we practice. Don't be surprised if your Quaker Kernel evolves as you explore new dimensions of your own spiritual journey. There is no perfect "kernel," but the one that is from your heart and connects with the listener will be effective.

Discovering and practicing your own Quick Quaker Kernel has many benefits. Not only will it empower you to respond to those unforeseen openings, but it will also give you more clarity about what is central to your own faith and practice. It may also shine a light on areas where you need more understanding or want to go deeper.

The amazing thing is that when several people in a meeting practice and share their Quaker Kernels with each other, it can set in motion a discernment process. In such a process, meetings often come to recognize their strengths, to better articulate who they are as a meeting and what they offer to individuals searching for a spiritual home and to a world that needs healing and Light. This then becomes reflected in how the meeting welcomes new attenders, how it describes itself on its website and newsletter, and how it conducts outreach to its community.

Shaping, practicing and evolving our own Quaker Kernel is a foundation of Quaker outreach to seekers and to the world. As George Fox said so long ago, the essence of Friends' offering rests on the simple question, "What can YOU say?"